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Thomas Michael Looney

ON THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN ALTAR

BY EDMUND BISHOP

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ON THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN ALTAR.

To enter on the discussion of an archæological question equipped only with a measure of mere book knowledge, and without practical acquaintance with monuments is venturesome. The case is mine at present. The attempt requires an apology. I make it at once; and so without more ado press forward to give a short account of the historical development of the Christian Altar.

The subject is rather a wide one; and it may not appear easy to make a safe and sure way through the seemingly endless variety of altar, and altar-piece, which the long series of the Christian centuries has produced. What I look for is a book that will give an intelligible history showing how the form and arrangements of the Christian Altar were influenced and modified at various periods by changed circumstances, altered ideas. Moreover, in regard to this particular matter, as in others that concern the liturgy, it is impossible to insist too much that it is neither individual caprice in high places, nor (to begin with) ecclesiastical decree, that brought about changes, but the sense—sometimes the real good sense, sometimes the very indifferent good sense—of the Christian people. The reader who may have the patience to follow this paper to the end will judge for himself whether it gives a *prima facie* reasonable sketch of the history of the Christian Altar; an account which he can understand and remember. The guide

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of my own steps along the unchancy road that has to be traversed, is the unassuming tractate of two plain Swabian priests mentioned in the note below; I believe the lines they lay down to be the true ones, their little book the best on the subject hitherto published. But the illustrations and references whether specifically mentioned or the basis of general statements are not pilfered but independently gathered for my own contentment; and I have dealt too with the subject generally after my own fashion.¹

Our history may be rationally divided into three periods; the first extending to the middle of the ninth century; the second henceforward to the close of the fourteenth; the third to the time of the Gothic revival. The church of the Catacombs, and our own day, might form periods in themselves; the former may be dismissed as wanting in practical interest; the second as, let us say, wanting in impersonality.

With the fourth century the Church stands out in the face of the world, free in a new and sovereign manner to fashion her outward adornment in accordance with her own spirit or under external influences from which, as no mere abstraction but a very mixed body of living men and women, she has at no time been free—in the fourth century less than most other ages. As is manifest at the first glance, the particular, the distinguishing, feature of the altar then and in the centuries that follow, in fact

¹ The tractate referred to above is Laib und Schwarz, *Studien über die Geschichte des christlichen Altars*, pp. 88 and 17 pl. oblong 4to., Stuttgart, 1857. According to my recollection Al. Schmid makes seven periods of the history of the altar: he might as well and as reasonably have made seventeen. I had thought of adding the references as notes at the end of the paper; but on going through it in proof it has seemed to me to read so much like a "lecture," and is so long, that I have been content to leave it with the few footnotes as printed.

during the first period,—whether the material be stone or wood, whether the altar be solid or whether it be hollow—is the prominence and respect given to the holy *Table*, as the place of sacrifice. It was in form not oblong as now in the West, but a cube ; and stood as a table in the utmost simplicity. The Lord's board was too holy (too "awful" is another view) to bear anything else but the Mystic Oblation itself, and such objects, the cup, the paten, the linen cloth, as were necessary for the offering up of the sacrifice. If indeed the Book of the Gospels lay on the altar from the beginning of the mass until the gospel was read, it is to be remembered that the Gospel Book was regarded as representing our Lord Himself, just as the altar came to be conceived of as the throne of the Great King. The rich altar coverings may be taken (I conceive) as an integral part of the altar itself. Everything of the nature of ornamental accessory was around, above, but apart from, the altar. And of these ornaments or accessories that which would most strike the eye perhaps, was largely determined by a consideration uppermost in the minds of many Christians of those days, an idea new in the now triumphant Church, viz., that the holy sacrifice was not merely a "mystery of faith," "the unspeakable mysteries" that must be withdrawn from the eye of the unbeliever, but a mystery so "dread" that upon it not even the Christian himself might gaze. Herein we have in great measure the explanation of the ciborium as it was then called, or baldaquin on four columns, which, as I may say with the old proverb, hit two (nay three) birds with one stone. First, strict use and requirement: the altar must be veiled ; here was a convenient means for hanging up veils or

curtains.² Secondly it served for honour: the existence of a covering, umbraculum, dais, umbella, over, and marking, the seat or station of the ruler, magistrate, pontiff, existed in the general instinct of the peoples; it was surely fitting to render the same honour to the seat of Majesty of the King of kings. Lastly it must be admitted that a mere square table, be it raised on many steps or on few, is not in itself a dignified object; the "ciborium" therefore satisfied the eye and fell in with the sense of the fitness of things in the mind of the common Christian worshipper in the fourth century and onwards; moreover it afforded (as was found little by little) all the opportunities for adorning the altar which the devout fancy might suggest without infringing on the idea of the inviolable sanctity of that holy board. Was it desired to have lights over and above the altar? they could be hung from the ciborium; flowers? the wreath could be twined round its columns; how could precious metals, gold, gems, more fully enrich the altar than by means of crowns hanging directly over it, suspended by chains from the roof of the ciborium within³? Was it desired to raise on high the banner of the Great King, the Cross, it could find no more fitting place than the apex of the ciborium. But it is unnecessary to proceed in further detail. From almost every point of view the altar of our first period (with its adjuncts) may, I think, be considered the ideal altar. I do not mean for imitation now-a-days; quite the contrary; that would be a make-believe. But given the requirements and the ideas

² In a painting in the Vienna "Genesis," attributed to the fourth century, is an altar ciborium with a veil only in front, i.e., towards the people (plate 7 in Wickhoff's reproduction).

³ A painting in the "Ashburnham Pentateuch" (7th cent. ?) shows how this was done. The crowns of the Guarrazar Treasure, now partly in Paris, partly in Madrid, are extant examples.

of those days (not of earlier times), it appears as a model of a fitting adaptation of means to ends.

Before passing on to the second period I must leave our guides and say a few words on my own account on matters not noticed by them, the treatment of which is necessary for understanding the natural development of our subject and the later restriction of its treatment to the Western Church. One and single as may be the Christian Divine worship in its essence, the liturgical forms and formulæ of the age with which we are now dealing are the genuine products of the native character, the proper and often very different religious feeling, of the various races, peoples, "churches" making up the one Church. And already in this first period, on the very threshold of it, in the fifth century, is to be found a distinction which clearly marks off two different ways of viewing, or even conceiving, the Christian sacrifice as an act of altar-worship; a difference which in fact has determined the whole later history of the altar in the East and West.⁴ Mention has just been made of the veils, &c., used to hide from the people the sight of the altar during the sacrifice. Throughout the Russo-Greek Church (to speak of the Eastern "Great Church" only) the iconostasis, as if a veritable wall, now effectively serves the same purpose; so effectually indeed that it shuts off the people from the sacrifice of the altar, it might be said, altogether. In making this remark I have neither wish nor intention to cast any reflection on this form of worship. I simply take a fact as a fact and presume that those who have adopted the form know what is best for

⁴ I say nothing in this paper about Rood Screens. The late Dr. J. M. Neale's distinction between the rood screen and the iconostasis sounds, and to some extent is, pedantic. But that distinction is so far well founded as to put the rood screen beyond the concern of the present brief sketch.

themselves. If we go into the churches of Rome there are rails, cancelli, mostly low, and that is all; and the altar lies open to the eye of every wayfarer. Here again I but mention a fact as a fact; and note the striking contrast as a fact too. But all this, on the one side and on the other, is not the product of mere "taste"; the practical reasons and the rationale of these two practices, which indicate two radically differing conceptions of the one great act of Christian public worship, go down deep into Christian antiquity; the roots of the difference lie as far back as at least the end of the fourth century. Let us take up the oldest Greek and Latin liturgy books that are at once typical and substantially practical, St. James and St. Basil on the one hand, and the Leonine and Gelasian books on the other. If we run through them ever so rapidly, but with observant eye, a distinction forces itself on the attention which is of concern for us here: in the Greek books a dominant note is this, the concern of the officiating priest, personally and individually, for his own unworthiness to offer the sacrifice; it is awe, fear, dread that speak to us in these Greek orders. This note may be said to be entirely absent from the Roman formulæ, which may be counted by hundreds; whilst in its stead this dominant note may be discerned: that the sacrifice is the sacrifice of combined priest and people, "*et plebis et praesulis.*" It would be out of place here even to indicate the growth in the fourth and fifth centuries of the living ideas of which the Russo-Greek iconostasis and the Roman altar rails are in the twentieth the material expression. But I may say in passing (remembering that I am a debtor for proofs of, or warrant for, all that has been and is here asserted) that these expressions of the Greek liturgies indicate not a

primitive but a late stage of Christian sense, feeling, devotion. Whilst the eloquent Chrysostom in his continual insistence on "fear and dread" of the "awful," the "terrible" sacrifice, the divine mysteries, had in view real abuses and grave irreverences attaching to the act of Holy Communion among the people of Antioch, it may be doubted whether his eloquence and his zeal do not carry him far away from the sense and feeling of the earlier Christian centuries, or whether he is not paving the way for, and is himself a witness to, a change in the appreciation of those mysteries by the Christian people themselves. Certainly St. Basil knows none of these "terrible" and "awful" words; the idea is unknown in the Liturgy of the Apostolic Constitutions which, interpolated though it is,⁵ represents there seems no reason to doubt faithfully for the point that concerns us, the traditional sense of the truly apostolic church of Antioch; it is not found in the prayer book of Sarapion which gives the religious type of official Egyptian piety as late as the middle of the fourth century. Subject to correction, the earliest witness I have found for that terror and awfulness of the Christian sacrifice which has issued in its entire withdrawal from the eyes of the people, is in St. Cyril of Jerusalem. But then I hasten to add that the Liturgy of "St. James," or the Hierosolymitan piety represented by St. Cyril, is the last quarter in which I should look for a true and untroubled rendering of the tone and spirit of Christian piety of the three earliest Christian centuries, the first to which I should turn to learn the newer developments, the new sense, feeling, religious sentiment, induced by,

⁵ I note by the way, to obviate possible objection, that Funk cannot find "heresy" in the Liturgy (*Die apost. Konst.* p. 358 sqq.; *Theol. Quartalschr.*, 1896, pp. 346-347).

or following on, the triumph of the Church.

It has been necessary to bring clearly into prominence in this place the difference in the type of public worship, so far as concerns the mass, that grew up and developed in the East and West ; and its cause. The effects of the later incursions of Byzantinism in various regions of the West bringing about modifications, as in much weightier matters, so too in such minor points as the use of veils, &c., &c., must in such a sketch as this be left out of account, or only mentioned to be passed by.⁶ With the institution of the iconostasis as a wall separating a church into two distinct parts, one for the clergy the other for the laity, any development or modification of the altar was, for reasons that are obvious, practically arrested in the regions influenced from Constantinople. Conservatism is easily maintained in matters under exclusive ecclesiastical control ; in the West the altar lay open to the influence of popular piety, of lay sentiment, lay taste, or want of it, and innovations and innovators could thus have free play. In spite of rood screens and other temporary or graver impedimenta, the publicity of the mass, its popular character, the oneness of the sacrifice combined of priest and people in word and deed, and its material expression in the open church on what has been termed the "all-seeing" principle, has maintained itself as typical for the West, to which the further evolution of the altar is now restricted and to which we may henceforth confine our attention.

Let us pass on to the altar of the second period. No one I think who has fairly reflected on what may be

⁶ I suppose *Lib. Pontif.* ed. Duchesne, I., 363, ll. 7-10, may refer to veils hanging round the altar from the baldachin ; and is the earliest case for Rome (684-5).

called the evolution of ecclesiastical ornament and design, to say nothing of weightier concerns, can fail to have been struck by the part taken therein by a certain (I think the prevalent) type of devout mind, the mark of whose action is commonly this—to emphasize or bring into prominence some accessory feature at the expense of the principal and main object, or indeed to proceed so far as to subordinate this latter to it. It was the same in the eighth century as in the eighteenth, and so I suppose it ever will be. This is just what happened in regard to the altar in our second and third periods. The first indication of the change appears in the homily or pastoral on the duties of the clergy which has commonly passed under the name of Pope Leo IV. and forms the groundwork of the address of the presiding prelate to the assembly in the *Ordo ad Synodum* of the present Roman Pontifical. Whatever be the date of the first draft (and I am suspicious of attempts to father it on an earlier writer) it is, I take it, certain that the document is of Gallican origin; and that, as testimony for the point which concerns us, it cannot be referred to a date earlier than the close of the eighth century. Its direction as to the altar, is as follows: “let nothing be placed on the altar but *capsae* with relics of the saints, or perchance the four holy Gospels of God, or a pyxis with the Body of our Lord as viaticum for the sick; other things to be stored in some clean place.” In this direction the item to be observed as important for the development of the altar is that which concerns the relics of the Saints, not (as in our day we should, or indeed most persons would, naturally have supposed) that concerning the Sacrament of the altar. For it must be allowed that during the whole middle ages, in spite of much Gallican

innovation in the order and ceremonies of the mass, the Blessed Sacrament reserved was commonly treated with a kind of indifference which at present would be considered to be of the nature of "irreverence," I will not say indignity. But the question of "reverence" or "irreverence" in these matters is one much more difficult to handle than some who deal with it with confident touch at all recognize; little realizing how entirely subjective are their appreciations, and how much the ideas even of persons external to the Roman Communion are really determined by practices and usages that are purely post-Tridentine or at most can be traced back to a type of devotionism developed in Germany in the century, or almost the decades, immediately preceding the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation.

The change involved in the permission cited above to place relics on the altar-table may seem slight, and, when taken in conjunction with the Gospel Book and the Body of our Lord, hardly worthy of notice: yet it was destined in the long run to modify the character, disposition and even situation of the altar. The prescription must be brought into connection with tendencies of the time which the lapse of very few years was to see greatly accentuated. Elsewhere in the *Downside Review* I touched for a moment on the spoiling of Italian cities and churches to the profit of the new buildings erected by Charles the Great in his own home. But this example was followed in their own way by great churches and monasteries in Frankish and Germanic lands. The ancient foundations as well as the new ones favoured by the new dynasty enriched themselves in the first half of the ninth century with relics, entire bodies of saints, brought from across the Alps and especially from Rome. Thus Fulda

by the care of Raban received the relics of St. Alexander and many others from Rome; Eginhard obtained those of SS. Peter and Marcellinus for his foundation of Seligenstadt, also from Rome; so too Coblenz, Corvey, Prüm, Reichenau and other establishments obtained like treasures; St. Severus was covertly stolen from Ravenna that the cathedral of Mentz might be thereby the richer; in 851 Salzburg welcomed St. Hermes, again from Rome; at an earlier date St. Liborius was brought from Le Mans to Paderborn. But churches which possessed the bodies of their own local saints were fired with emulation, and resolved that these should hold their own in public esteem as against, or along with, the outlandish importations. "Translations" and "elevations" became the order of the day. The Norman invasions in the later half of the ninth century compelled many churches along the whole of Western France to carry their relics further inland for safety. This movement, whereby churches which could not hitherto boast of bodies of saints became possessed of those removed from their proper resting place, contributed to promote further this cultus. Moreover these numerous translations must have tended to bring into vogue portable shrines as distinguished from the old system of confessions and tombs or repositories of solid masonry underneath the altar. The new spirit of devotion required (we must be content with the facts that are there to speak for themselves and not seek reason in a case where *stat pro ratione voluntas*) required, I say, that the relics of the saints instead of lying underneath, underground, should be raised up, put above, on, the altar. Here the congruity of the ancient practice with the words in the Apocalypse of St. John, *Vidi subtus altare*, etc., was held of no account, for the

dictates of newly developed tastes among the devout people required it should be otherwise.

How was the combination of altar and raised shrine to be carried out? It is to be remembered that at this time the practice of dividing the bodies of the saints into portions or particles was not yet in vogue; indeed it ran counter to the then prevalent feelings of reverence, at least in the West. Shrines were therefore large, as large as the altar, larger indeed than those simple cubes which ancient piety had found sufficient and becoming. Such shrines raised up required a good solid base. Speaking in a rough and general way this is what was done. The relic chest (shrine adorned with precious metals etc.,) was placed commonly at right angles with the altar, close to the back, and in the centre, of it; raised on a base of masonry, one end of the shrine rested on the altar itself, and formed a sort of rich ornamental centre piece,—where our present tabernacle is, and giving perhaps something of the same effect. Or else it rested on a low retable for the sake of giving to the whole height and dignity. On this arrangement the ciborium could be retained only with some difficulty; and accordingly under the new system the ciborium was made to cover not the altar but the shrine; as at Lorsch in the later years of the tenth century, where it is described as "*super requiem Martyris.*" And by-and-bye it gradually falls into disuse. Indeed when we look at abbot Suger's great altar at S. Denis (this is only a conjectural restoration on documentary evidence, it is true, but not for us the less instructive), or minor altars in the same church, or the old high altar of N.D. at Paris, or of Arras cathedral—all well known examples to be found in the usual books—it is clear that the ciborium in such cases would

be only in the way. Of course it may be said that all this could only have effect in great and notable churches. This is true ; but then as we all know, or can know, it is the great people who set the fashion in this world and the imitation of our "betters" has become as it were an instinct. So it was in the case we are considering, as may appear in reviewing the practical effect of the new system.

Speaking in general terms the effect was this : that whereas the old altars had as it were neither back nor front but were free all around, and looked alike to the people and singers on the nave side and to the clergy celebrant or ministrant in the presbytery, the new combination of altar with shrine gave to the altar a back and a front ; and so the way was paved for placing, in defiance both of precedent and ancient reverence, the altar against the wall of the church as we find in our parish churches of the Gothic period, and indeed in principle in the greatest churches too ; and so we come to hear by-and-bye of frontals and dossals, and reredoses, and the like. Moreover from obvious considerations of *bienséance* there arose a natural tendency to lengthen the altar and substitute for the cube, which might easily appear as a mere end of the base of the shrine, an oblong ; and the fashion once started the oblong became more and more pronounced. And this of itself tended to hasten the disuse of the ciborium from considerations of good taste and convenience, or indeed of mere good sense, which need not be here developed. But the disuse of the old ciborium resting on four columns and with solid roof brought with it inevitably other changes. We have seen that it served on its summit to bear the cross, beneath suspended lights or pendant crowns, the latter indeed enriched with pendant crosses hanging right

over, almost on the altar; besides curtains and adornments that an ingenious piety might fancy. For all these, which could not be given up, a place must be found. The principle of the inviolability of the Lord's board once infringed, the practice of its infringement was destined to go far. No longer reserved exclusively for the sacrifice, why should not a cross, lights, be placed on the Holy Table itself? And so it was done, little by little, now here, now there; in some places only during the sacrifice, in others permanently. Thus at the abbey of Zwifalten in Swabia the cross was kept "*jugiter*" and "*semper*" on the altar itself at a date earlier than 1135. At first, or in some places, only one candlestick was placed on one side of the altar, as a set off it would seem to a cross placed on the other; by the thirteenth century the symmetrical arrangement of two candles was common, though there was still a certain chariness in regard to the novelty; in one case I remember to have observed in an inventory of this date (I think of a parish church in northern Italy) that brackets over the altar were used instead of candlesticks on it. By the fourteenth century the close of our second period, whatever be the exception or the survival of archaism here or there, the practice of two candlesticks on the altar, was general, or the law. And this, for side altars, is the real or historical meaning of the rubric in the Roman missal, *i.e.*, the meaning of those who wrote, approved, and promulgated it; though of course I should *ex animo* accept for practice the interpretation the modern rubrician has tended to give it. But this by the way.

Another cause contributed to a change in the form of the altar producing the long narrow structures common in the West. In the eleventh century, and yet more in

the twelfth, churches were commonly rebuilt, and new monastic churches were founded, on a much grander scale than hitherto. As churches came to be built longer, smaller altars no longer pleased. I give a few examples. At Petershausen in the diocese of Constance up to about 1134 the high altar was quite small—“*parvulum*”; hollow, and made out of five square stones—“*sed tantum ex quinque quadris lapidibus compaginatum*”; this the abbot did away with and built another “*majus et sublimius*” according to the taste of his time. At the abbey of Lower Altaich in Bavaria up to 1253 there were six altars in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin; since they were “*nimis contigua et valde parva*”—“excessively crowded and so very small”; “*et propter hoc essent multum despectui*”—“and as now-a-days nothing obtains respect unless it advertizes itself as big,” abbot Herman cleared them out and put two in their place. The author of an interesting and curious tractate carefully recording the old customs that were dying out in Alsace in the thirteenth century, describes the altars found in that province in the early part of the century as commonly three feet high, broad, and long, the mensa projecting beyond the sides every way about four inches. Here is the old cube altar surviving still in the country parish churches, but the projection of the mensa shews, I apprehend, the influence even here of the newer fashions. Here or there even some great or wealthy corporation chose to keep to the old paths. So at St. Martial’s at Limoges a new ciborium was put up in 1220 and the “*subterraneum*” completed at large cost; this I gather to be a continuance of the old arrangement of the first period. And at Scheyern in Bavaria the ciborium of the high altar was finished in 1224. But though the

ciborium disappears (Italy, at least Central and Southern Italy, is not in question here) the need very soon shews itself for some new way to secure a covering for the altar place, and for a continuance with some modifications of the curtains that hung therefrom. In this connection must be brought the prescription of several councils, especially of Lower Germany, in the thirteenth century, requiring that a white linen cloth be stretched up over the altar—“*sursum super altare*”—extending over its length and breadth; here only cases of extreme poverty are contemplated. Elsewhere the new style of canopy might be either in wood or richer stuffs. From a York register of capitular visitations of churches I gather such a canopy or “*celatura*” was general in that diocese. But the mere linen cloth is a descendant in direct line from the ciborium and (besides keeping off dust from the Holy Table) was intended no less than it to serve as a mark of honour and reverence.

In course of time the shrines originally placed at the back of and touching the altar were, with the lengthening of the eastern arm of the church and the adoption of long choirs in the new-rising Gothic structures, detached and thrown eastward (but still placed lengthwise east and west as before) as in the case of so many of our cathedral and larger monastic churches, Ely, Canterbury, St. Albans; though the old system must have been in some places long maintained. Thus it was not until about the year 1345 that Thomas de la Mare then the prior of Tynemouth removed the shrine of St. Oswin, till now “*altari majori connexum*,”—“attached to the high altar,” and put it “in the place where it now stands, so that pilgrims could walk all round it and more easily

and freely pay their devotions thereat."

But such isolation of the altar consequent on isolation of the shrine dictated naturally the development of the solid reredos, for which pattern was long ago found in the hanging dossals or in the churches where the high altar had been already attached to the eastern wall. And this brings us to the altar of our third period, extending from the fourteenth century to the second or third decade of the nineteenth, the period of great reredos altars. The rudimentary retable which the great relic altars had introduced had by the close of the fourteenth century become so far enlarged that it afforded a welcome field for the exercise of the arts of the sculptor and painter. In these favourable circumstances the dimensions of the reredos went on continually increasing until in the last days of Gothic it attained a size fit to compare with the best efforts of later days. But the new retables, or reredoses instead of resting on their own base came now to rest in fact not infrequently, and always to the eye, on the altar table itself which thus came to look as if a serviceable base for a superincumbent mass of ornamentation. By-and-by it was found most convenient to throw back the great altar-pieces of the new type against the church wall, as well to obtain support for these mighty structures as to save trouble, expense and ingenuity in making something passable out of the back of the reredos itself.

Be it noted there is here no question of styles. In our third period the typical "altars," Gothic, Renaissance, Rococo, shew this common character: their main feature seems to be an extension and accumulation of accessory ornament at the expense of the thing itself for the sake of which the ornament exists. The

towering altar-pieces of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which obstructed the choirs of many a grand Gothic church, to which was sacrificed so much of brilliant painted glass, so much of architectural elegance and beauty, are still only too often set down to the credit of "the Renaissance" and its evil influence; but in fact those times only bettered the instruction they had received from the exaggerated models of declining Gothic. The later styles used the means and forms proper to their own genius but they did no more than pursue the end the later Gothic had set before itself. And so it came about naturally that by-and-by to erect a "fine altar" meant to put up an immense (some may think monstrous) and highly decorated altar-piece. In fact the high altar (i.e., reredos) of Winchester or of St. Albans, so justly admired, and the miserable wooden painted thing put up in many a noble French church by aspiring poverty in the early days after the Revolution, really belong to the same family; the aim was to put up something strikingly rich and beautiful, no doubt, if possible; but at any cost, even the least, something strikingly big. It was the very inversion of the ideas of the earlier Christian days: that I conceive to be true; but it was also the way in which the men of the time conceived the rendering of honour to the holy altar, that is all. Nor indeed am I insensible to the merit in their own way of characteristic altar-pieces of even "the worst period" (as our friend the Puritan will have it). I recall a particular case: in an out-of-the-way country village, a great church built by a wealthy community in the second half of the eighteenth century, grandly proportioned, lofty, light, airy, white-washed; with this peculiarity that the tower is at the east end and rises over the high altar. This "altar" occupies the whole eastern wall, towering up to the vault some

eighty or ninety feet, a pyramid of black and white marble, niches, urns, ornaments in profusion all complete. The effect is superb; so I thought when I first saw it as a youngster, so it has always seemed to me still when I have seen it since. But whether there were altar there or tabernacle, so far as *observation* goes I never noticed and cannot tell. So far as I can make out, in our first period the idea by which everything was determined was the very altar of God itself; in our last the determinant is the senses of the beholder and the impression to be made by the designer upon him.

This same tendency to strike, to occupy, the beholder with accessories is observable from the first, in matters of detail no less than in general design, in the altar characteristic of our third period. The altar is loaded with temporary as well as permanent ornaments. It came to serve as a sort of expository on great feast days for all the church treasury and church plate, reliquaries and what not in the shape of arms and busts and many another form of beauty besides; objects that were now multiplied beyond measure, on the one hand through the commonness of small relics, fragments, a tendency greatly promoted by the importation of such relics from the East and especially Constantinople during the time of the Crusades, and on the other by the veritable mania for rich plate which prevailed in the second half of the fourteenth century. I will take two special examples of this mode of shewing reverence to the altar; one taken from the first, the other from the last days of our period, each characteristic of its own time. In the first half of the fifteenth century Duke Lewis of Bavaria, who had persecuted the church of Freising, "*ad cor rediens*"—"coming to a better mind"—gave to it a great silver image (of some saint may we suppose?)

“*secundum se formatam*,” “in the likeness of himself,” as a pledge that he would refrain in future from his past ill practices ; which image (says the chronicler) I myself have often seen when *totum sanctuarium in altari stetit*—“the whole church-treasury of Freising stood on the high altar” on festal days. This is an example of a type common enough in those times which few churches are rich enough, except perhaps in Bohemia or Hungary, Portugal or Spain, to imitate to-day ; a type that some might be disposed to call the *buffet* (or sideboard) style of altar. My warrantor for the second case, a careful and interested eye-witness, says this altar-piece was elaborate and rich in the extreme, and the quantity of ornament with which it was loaded was distributed without much discretion “everywhere.” “To say the truth (he continues) this altar is not happily conceived ; it is so low and overburdened that it is no easy matter to descry the officiating priest. But it is certain that there is not an altar in the kingdom more richly decorated, and whereon there is a greater quantity of reliquaries and vases and candlesticks and branches and lamps and other such things, some of silver, some of silver-gilt, some even of gold. Indeed nothing is wanting to complete its magnificence ; and besides it has ingenious and clever sacristans who are continually inventing new modes of adorning it.” We have reached the zenith ; after this decline only is possible.

Of course during this period there were survivals of earlier practice : but our business is to have prominently before us what is typical of each period ; it is the rising tide that is our chief concern, not the ebb. Angers cathedral, for instance, maintained the extreme severity of earlier ages ; Lyons made a point of honour

to do its best in the same direction; Amiens (of the high altar of which, as it existed at the close of the seventeenth century, a description is given us by a citizen and shopkeeper of the time who read Claude de Vert, and had pretty notions about the Liturgy, and the Office, and church things generally) — Amiens at that date may be taken more or less as a representative of the relic altar of the second period. Notices of ancient altars of French cathedrals and other large churches at the beginning of the eighteenth century abound; it is a pity the subject has not been dealt with in a monograph. Here it will be enough to mention the arrangement of the old high altar of Notre Dame at Paris, demolished to make way for the sumptuous embellishment of the choir carried out at the expense of Louis XIV., as perhaps it gave the idea of the high chantry of Henry V. in the apse of Westminster Abbey. At the extremity of the choir, on the site of the new altar of Louis XIV. and behind the old one, was the altar of the Trinity, commonly called also *des Ardens*, raised up so that it could be seen over the high altar from the stalls of the choir. Underneath it was a place called the *Conditoire*, kept locked, in the cupboard of which all the vestments, etc., for high mass were kept; in former times the Blessed Sacrament had also been reserved there. It would appear from a paper sent to the liturgist Le Brun that an arrangement somewhat similar existed in the cathedral of Troyes. His informant writing about 1714-15 says: "our high altar has been moved; it has been raised three steps and placed further eastwards, close to, and on the same level with, an altar that is behind it at which were said masses for the dead and obits.⁷ Before the

⁷ Does this throw any light on the name "*Autel des Ardens*" at Notre Dame?

change it was possible from the choir to see this altar, and the priest saying mass at it, above the high altar. Now it is quite out of sight and disused, the masses formerly said at it being now said at the high altar." With the eighteenth century a change came, and the high altars on the old models in the French cathedrals are, concurrently with the adoption of the new breviaries, frequently replaced by an "*autel à la Romaine*"; that is, as interpreted then, plain, of good or precious material, marble, with six great silver candlesticks upon it and a greater silver crucifix in the middle. Rural churches, if only for the reason that they are poor and have commonly small resources or none, were more conservative; and it is towards these that the archæologist should direct his attention in every country to discover the relics of venerable antiquity and ancient discipline. But those whose main interest is development, or evolution, must turn their attention elsewhere.

So much for the past. With one observation on that period excluded from our historical survey, the present, and another on Rome, I cease. And for the first: it is in our present, modern, days that the reserved Sacrament has for the first time come to be recognised generally as the main determinant for the design of the high altar. Objection may be taken perhaps to such a statement; but I think a little reflection and knowledge will show it to be just. The document cited above, when we passed from our first period to the second, shewed that there was then, at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries, the possibility suggested of a combination of the altar and the reserved Sacrament as a starting-point for a new development, at least in France. As a fact the combination of altar and relic shrine was adopted. It might be

thought at first blush that at least the altar of our third period received for determinant the combination passed over in the ninth century. But that this was not so will appear I believe from two considerations. One is based on the very character of that type of altar itself. The other attaches to the history of religious sentiment; between which and doctrine, and the effects of either, I hasten to add, it is necessary carefully to discriminate. Just as ritual is the mere husk, so religious sentiment is of the very inner life, of Liturgy; but it is all too little heeded, indeed quite overlooked commonly, I fancy, in dealing with that subject historically. How many of us instinctively realise, I wonder, the modernness of the sense implied by the idea of our churches as "the home of the Blessed Sacrament." Personally of course I cannot undo myself of this sense, and indeed should feel lost, and as if bereft, in them without it; moreover it is this sense which perhaps more than anything else devoutly impresses "well-minded" persons who are not of our communion. But this has nothing to do with the historical question; which doubtless it would be profitable to understand also.

It is a fact that the general character of the typical altar-piece of our third period was fixed before, and long before, the tide of devotional feeling had turned in the direction just indicated. There is no question of countries presumedly more or less naturally "Catholic" here; no question of this side of the Alps or Pyrenees and the other. For instance, the Blessed Sacrament was kept "*in quodam angulo*"—"in an out-of-the-way corner"—of the cathedral of Verona up to the second or third decade of the sixteenth century when the great reforming bishop Ghiberti had it enclosed in a "tabernacle"

of marble and crystal, borne by four angels in brass, and the whole (not placed on, but) suspended over the high altar "that he might excite the devout minds of priests and people to godly piety" towards the reserved Sacrament of the altar. How long this "suspension" was maintained in the cathedral of Verona I do not know; but the arrangement Ghiberti adopted, when taken in connection with his professed object, is worthy of attention. For the altar-pieces characteristic of our third period bear on their face the evidence that they were not designed with the end Ghiberti had in view and that they are not well calculated to compass it. If in any of these structures the idea is betrayed of calling primarily attention to the conditorium of the Blessed Sacrament, the great edifice, often domical, surmounting the centre of the altar, was for show not use; the real tabernacle was no more than an obscure little cupboard underneath their base—*antrum* is the term Sebastian Paoli, an excellent, learned and observant Neapolitan priest applies to it in the middle of the eighteenth century. Bishop Ghiberti's instinct I think was true, his sense of the adaptation of means to ends just, when he adopted the method of the "suspension" over his high altar: it was at once the easiest and most effective way of making the Blessed Sacrament reserved the central object of a church of at least large dimensions. But his case is only an "early anticipation." This, too, was the strong point (if my memory does not play me false) of Louis the Fourteenth's work on the altar of Notre Dame. That, and how, this is so, any visitor can verify for himself at the cathedral of Amiens still to-day. The little golden cup in the centre of the great "gloire" put up in the eighteenth century draws

to it all eyes that will let themselves be simply and naturally guided by what they see before them; to the eyes of the believer it dominates that vast choir and the Presence it hides is by him felt. Here in our last period (to such as will lay aside those disturbing antipathies arising from changes in taste or preferences of style) is an instance of a fitting adaptation of means to ends. It combined the taste of the time for big altar-pieces with an uncompromising, overruling, assertion of the Sacrament as the very principle of life of the church building itself.

The slow process of development which was to issue in our present sense in regard to the combination of the conditorium for the reserved Sacrament and the altar is, I think, roughly and generally speaking, somewhat as follows; and the statement holds good, I believe, in its general outlines for almost every part of the Western church. In the middle ages the idea connected with the "*Sainte Réserve*" (even after the popularization of the Corpus Christi procession and the spread of the use of the monstrance) was not worship but viaticum; nor was it connected either with the idea of ordinary communion. Even the devout then communicated but four or five times a year and at certain great feasts. The parish priest knew the number of his intending communicants on each occasion and consecrated the required number of hosts accordingly. During the whole middle ages the usual place of reservation was some recess, or as it were cupboard, often closed with iron-bars, sometimes fairly high up, in the wall on the Gospel, and more rarely on the Epistle, side of the altar. Sometimes (as bishop Devie says was the case in the district of Bresse north of Lyons) the "*petite armoire grillée*," as he calls it, was "*au fond du cœur*." All this is speaking generally: and I would add in

passing that any idea, if it exists, that the "suspension" was the universal discipline, even throughout France, needs, I think, revision. Besides other objections that may be taken to this method of what may be called the "*loculus in muro*," there is but a too common one—damp. This was probably an effectual consideration in the later invention of "sacrament houses" prevalent in the Low Countries and Germany on into the Slavic lands in communion with Rome: but this was obviously an expedient that could be adopted only by wealthy churches, not in country parishes, where the difficulty had to be met in another way. With the gradual increase of frequent communion at uncertain times that spread in the later years of the sixteenth century and grew yet more marked in the seventeenth, other and obvious inconveniences of the old arrangement were increasingly felt; and the tabernacle on the altar was the obvious way out of them; from which transfer has in an insensible manner grown up that modern and now prevailing sense that I have mentioned above. It did not come about at once; but the change did introduce a new idea (or revived a "primitive" one) in regard to the "*Sainte Réserve*" itself; the once exclusive idea of viaticum gradually fell into the background, and the idea of reservation of the Sacrament at the altar now grew to be dominantly connected with the idea of communion, but now in the church building itself. So much was this the case and so naturally did all this come about that in one case that I have noticed (the parish church of Neisse, the finest and best served parish church in Silesia, with no less than forty-five altars) the large host for the weekly procession of the Blessed Sacrament on Thursdays and the hosts for the sick were reserved in the Sacrament-house apart from the altar, whilst the hosts "*pro communicantibus*"

were reserved in the tabernacle which was on the high altar. But (speaking of course generally and with due reserve made for any exceptional regions in these or in earlier days) frequent communion has been at no time, in the periods with which we are mainly concerned, the common rule among country-folk, *rusticani*, *pagani*, or what we may please to call them; and so in country churches the inconveniences of the old arrangement have not been so acutely felt as in the towns, and the reservation of the Sacrament, even in the old-style mediæval *loculi*, has survived in some quarters till a late period, almost or even quite to the general crash at the end of the eighteenth century.

Due consideration of all the "moments" of the case and of the body of facts available can, I think, issue in no other conclusion than the one indicated above: that it is only in recent times—those excluded from discussion in this paper—that the idea of giving unmistakable prominence in relation to the altar of the actual and real conditorium of the Blessed Sacrament has come in a generally recognised way to be the problem that has to be solved by architect and designer in regard to the high altar of a church.

To deal with "Rome" is always to enter on dangerous ground; if only in that we all and always seem to be wanting to point a moral—of one kind or another—when our discourse is occupied with that theme. There are many reasons besides; but this is apparently a constant one. I remember many years ago the late Dean Stanley wrote a short series of articles for *Good Words* mainly designed for the use of our northern neighbours, on Rome, modern Rome, as a living witness to the simplicity of early Christianity. They were written with his usual

persuasive ingenuity and charm; it all read so easily. There was the Pope, for instance, in his simple white habit: the Dean had much that was effective to say on this. But it was a disconcerting thought if one happened to remember that the first time a colour is mentioned as specifically the Pope's own for his dress, it was red; and red it continued for centuries. But then (as an excellent clergyman deceased, who was almost as good as a journalist, has said): "The man of facts is a bore; he has such a way of tripping one up." I feel the want at this moment of a tractate on the history of the Christian altar in Rome from the beginning till now, written by a "man of facts"; for I am in fear that without it, even in the few words that follow, I may just be humbly following Dean Stanley's example; and the worst of it is, I feel there is a "moral" dogging my steps too, whether I will or not.

First of all, to recognize the Roman high altar of the present day for what it really is we must eliminate the Roman churches of the religious orders; they represent, in this point at all events, not Rome but themselves. Turning to the real Roman churches of Rome I find that the French chapters who rebuilt their high altars in the eighteenth century and designated their new altars described above as "*à la Romaine*," knew well what they were doing and saying. There was however one feature usually lacking in these French copies,⁸ the ciborium or baldaquin. And as I look at the high altar of the genuine Roman type I seem to recognize there, in a degree and manner found nowhere else, a singular survival of the ideas and forms of our

⁸ But not in the "Roman" altars put up by the Maurists who seem to have set the fashion (e.g., Bec. before the close of the seventeenth century; S. Germain-des-Prés, a very interesting example, in 1704); as Val-de-Grace set the fashion to the Maurists.

first period. "But the six candlesticks and crucifix?" some one may say. If we really want to form a just opinion as to comparative or relative fidelity to, or conservation of, an original type or tradition, the only sensible, reasonable, indeed possible, term of comparison for the "Roman" altar of to-day is, not the Christian altar simply as it was thirteen or fourteen hundred years ago, but prevalent modern forms. In spite of the six candlesticks and crucifix I think only one answer is possible.

Before ending, I will ask what of that prescription in the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* as to the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament not at the high altar of cathedrals but at a side altar? It is not prescription by mere arbitrary fiat, but a prescription that has been derived from Roman practice. Somehow it recalls to me an item of "discipline" now passed and gone,—the "*loculus in muro.*" Is there some actual and real connection between this and that? Or is this *rapprochement* merely wayward and irrational fancy on my part?

EDMUND BISHOP.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LIST.

AT various times I have been asked for a list of papers or articles written by me ; and this was the rather insisted on because, without special indication, they were not likely to be found. I take occasion of the present reprint to give the list that follows. Such output is but small ; and I may say that little, if anything, in it has been fairly premeditated, that all has been accidental : in compliance with a request, in answer to a question, in pursuance of a suggestion, coming from without ; or in response to some chance remark or occurrence. This may help to explain the miscellaneous character, and the slightness, of the various items. Sometimes, in part through, in part not through, my own fault, some of them have appeared without due correction. I say this not in excuse of the inexcusable but as warning to any reader that more than one piece in the accompanying list will be found in a state of which he may justly complain. One or two reviews have been included as embodying some substantive, if brief, observations proper to illustrate the subject discussed. Other things of the same kind have doubtless escaped my memory.

In regard to Nos. 73 to 75, I am glad of this opportunity of giving some explanation ; especially as it has been necessary for practical reasons to communicate to more than one person the details given under No. 75. At the time when Nos. 73 and 74 appeared there was no suitable medium in England for articles of this particular type, and for various reasons the way was not open to me so to utilize the organs that did exist. And doubtless the way that came suited better. Between Dom Bäumer and me there existed the most complete mutual confidence ; we were both alike in caring for the *Ding an sich* first, whilst from character and type of mind the one was in this kind of work a useful, indeed necessary, complement of the other. I therefore threw myself heartily into the opportunity which thus offered itself of getting a real, not a nominal, hearing in Germany. It would serve no purpose to attempt a nice discrimination (even if it were possible) of the respective shares of each in Nos. 73 and 74. In

regard to No. 75 the case is different. In the winter of 1893 Dom Bäumer came to England that we might go through the manuscript of his book on the Breviary together. I induced him to substitute for some hundred or more pages on the later French Breviaries the eleven lines "Absichtlich gehe ich . . . einiges Licht werfen" now found at p. 535 of the print; and to insert the new matter detailed below. Some of this had been already written years before to clear my own "views," and only required a last revision and translation; the larger part was written there and then by us together, first drawn up in English (which he knew perfectly) and then put into German. The recognition of such help in the preface to the *Geschichte des Breviers* is in words according to my own choosing.

E.B.

7th February, 1906.

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73. Bäumer (S.). Das Stowe Missale. In *Zeitschrift f. kathol. Theologie* (Innsbruck), vol. xvi p. 446 seqq. (1892).
 74. Bäumer (S.). Ueber das sogenannte Sacramentarium Gelasianum. In *Historisches Jahrbuch* vol. xiv p. 241 seqq. (1893).

* This is the so-called 'Missale Moissiacense' Harl. MS. 2893. As the opportunity occurs, it may be as well to mention that the so-called "Sacramentary of Nevers" among the Harleian MSS., the oldest Sacramentary at the British Museum, is really a book of Sainte Colombe at Sens; but adapted and altered to serve for the Church of Nevers. This at least is the conclusion I arrived at after an exhaustive examination, the detailed results of which were, as well as the Nevers Cathedral inventory of the tenth century, communicated to Canon Boutillier of Nevers in correction of the old account supplied (I think by a Marist Father) to the late Mgr. Crosnier many years before. The inventory has been printed; but I do not know that the account of the Sacramentary has been utilized. What is wanted, and what I had hoped for, is a comparison of the results obtained with (first of all) the eleventh century Sacramentary printed by the Société Nivernaise (Paris B. N. MS. Lat. 17333), with a view to ascertaining whether the mediæval Nevers Missal does not finally go back for its original to Sens.

75. Bäumer (S). *Geschichte des Breviers* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1895)—pp. 203-218, 223-227 (to "disputans"), 228-240, 263-265, 279-285, 303-327; also p. 365 l. 6 to p. 374 l. 14, first printed in *Katholik* (Mainz) 1891, vol. i pp. 315-328. These passages in the French translation (Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1905) are vol. i pp. 293-304 l. 6, 306-316, 322-325, 327-342, 351-353, 378-380, 400-409; vol. ii pp. 1-33, 87 l. 18-96 l. 16.

